Recent Demographic Trends in Nonmetropolitan America: First Evidence from the 2010 Census

Executive Summary

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Rural America encompasses nearly 75 percent of the land area of the United States, and 51 million people call it home. Yet ongoing population changes challenge rural areas in new ways. Some areas, for example, must address declining population as more people die than are born and young people continue to leave. Other areas have the opposite problem. They must deal with rapid growth as retirees and others seek out the beauty of rural areas. Still others must address a changing demographic profile as the nation becomes increasingly diverse. These demographic shifts will tax rural communities in new ways and call for tailored policy solutions to distinct rural area needs.

Rural areas are no stranger to demographic change. Early in the nation’s history, migration fueled most rural growth, as vast new frontiers of the country were opened to homesteading and economic development. Soon after settlement, natural increase (more births than deaths) began to contribute heavily to population growth owing to high fertility rates among a growing rural population. By the 1920s, however, people began leaving rural America, attracted by opportunities in cities and as the mechanization and consolidation of agriculture led to a growing surplus of farm workers. Over the next 50 years, the general pattern was unchanging: more people left rural areas than arrived (Figure 1). With the exception of the 1970s and again in the 1990s, this pattern would continue nearly unabated. The 1970s saw a remarkable demographic turnaround. For the first time in at least 150 years, population gains in nonmetropolitan areas exceeded those in metropolitan areas, fueled by rural restructuring including job growth associated with rural retirement migration, natural resources (e.g., coal and gas), and recreational development. Urban sprawl and changing residential preferences also contributed. At the dawn of the 21st century, the future of rural America was once again in question. This paper analyzes nonmetropolitan demographic changes during the first decade of the 21st century. Of particular interest are the contributions of natural increase (more births than deaths) and net migration, as well as the increasing role that minority populations are playing in the growth of the nonmetropolitan population.

1 Of course, there were exceptions to this trend in some industrializing regions, such as the Northeast, and at the urban fringe, where rural communities and the open countryside were assimilated into sprawling metropolitan areas. Still, more than half of the nation’s rural counties lost population between 1920 and 1970 (Johnson 1985; Johnson 2006).
**Data and Methods**

We use counties as the unit of analysis. Counties have historically stable boundaries and are a basic unit for reporting fertility, mortality, and census data by the federal government. Counties are designated as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan using criteria developed by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Metropolitan areas include counties containing an urban core of a population of at least 50,000, along with adjacent counties that are highly integrated with the core county as measured by commuting patterns. There are 1,090 metropolitan counties in the United States. The remaining 2,051 counties are classified as nonmetropolitan. County population data are from the decennial census for 1990, 2000, and 2010. They are supplemented with data from the Federal-State Cooperative Population Estimates program (FSCPE).

**Findings**

**Population Changes in Rural America**

Overall, population growth in rural America slowed precipitously after 2000, to roughly half that in the prior decade. Between 2000 and 2010, nonmetropolitan counties gained 2.2 million residents—an increase of 4.5 percent—to reach a population of 51 million in April 2010. The gains were greatest in counties adjacent to metropolitan areas, as was the case in the 1990s. Regionally, population gains were greatest in the West and Southeast, as well as on the periphery of large urban areas in the Midwest and Northeast (Figure 2). Areas of the upper Great Lakes, the Ozarks, and Northern New England known for their amenities also grew. Meanwhile, the Great Plains and Corn Belt, the Mississippi Delta, parts of the Northern Appalachians, and in the industrial and mining belts of New York and Pennsylvania lost population.

**Balancing Natural Increase and Net Migration**

Rural areas, especially those not adjacent to metro areas, were less often destinations of those who packed up and moved in the 2000s, which contributed to the decline. During the 1990s, migration accounted for nearly two-thirds of the entire rural population gain. After 2000, migration would account for less than half of the gain. And most of the gains from migration would bypass the more isolated rural counties. In rural counties not adjacent to a metropolitan area, the net migration gain was just 0.3 percent between 2000 and 2010. By contrast, rural counties adjacent to metropolitan areas saw a 3 percent gain from migration.

Meanwhile, natural increase remained relatively stable. With migration falling, rural areas would come to rely more heavily on natural increase to replenish the population. Indeed, it would account for half of the population gain in rural areas between 2000 and 2010.
Demographic Change by County Type

The type of industry or economy in a county matters to population gains and losses. Following trends nationwide that saw manufacturing continue to decline, counties with a manufacturing base saw only a 3.1 percent net population gain between 2000 and 2010, and a gain driven largely by natural increase. Likewise, the modest population gains (2.6 percent) in mining counties were also entirely dependent on natural increase. Farming-dependent counties barely grew at all, just 0.3 percent (Figure 3), all due to a natural increase large enough to offset a migration loss.

The demographic story was quite different in rural counties that offer natural amenities, recreational opportunities, or quality-of-life advantages. These are the counties in mountain and coastal regions of the West, in the upper Great Lakes, in coastal and scenic areas of New England and upstate New York, in the foothills of the Appalachians and Ozarks, as well as in coastal regions from Virginia to Florida. vii, viii, ix Such “high-amenity counties” have consistently been the fastest growing in rural America. The 277 rural counties that are destinations for retirement migrants exemplify this trend. In each of the past several decades, they have grown faster than any other rural county type; between 2000 and 2010, their population gain was 13.4 percent. The 299 nonmetropolitan recreational counties were close behind at 10.7 percent. The migration streams include both those seeking the amenities, and those who are attracted by the economic opportunities that follow such rapid growth.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 and 2010

Figure 2 | Nonmetropolitan Population Change, 2000 to 2010
The Increasing Importance of Minorities to Rural Demographic Change

Minorities are fueling much of the population growth in rural areas. Between 2000 and 2010, minorities accounted for 82.7 percent of the overall nonmetropolitan population gain, even though they represented just 21 percent of the rural population. All told, the nonmetropolitan minority population grew by 1.8 million (21.3 percent) between 2000 and 2010. This compares with a gain of just 382,000 (0.95 percent) among the non-Hispanic white population. Thus, while nonmetropolitan America remains less diverse than urban America, minority growth now accounts for most of the rural population increase, just as it does in urban areas.

The levels of diversity vary considerably by region (Figure 4). Large concentrations of African-Americans remain in rural areas of the Southeast, and many are returning from northern cities, although most are moving to metropolitan areas. Hispanics have lived in the Southwest for centuries. More recently, they are spreading beyond this traditional hub to rural areas of the Southeast and Midwest. Though small in overall numbers, native peoples represent an important element of many rural communities in the Great Plains and parts of the West. To be sure, large areas of rural America remain overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white.

A surprisingly small number of counties in rural America are multiethnic. There are scattered areas in the Southwest where native peoples and Hispanics live in the same counties, and in the Southeast and Texas, blacks and Hispanics sometimes reside in the same county. But in general, though rural America is becoming more diverse, it is on a modest scale, with one or at most two racial groups residing in the same rural county.

The driving force behind the substantial minority population gain in nonmetropolitan areas is the growth of the Hispanic population (Figure 5). During the 1990s, Hispanics accounted for 25 percent of the entire rural population gain. A decade later, they accounted for 54 percent of the rural population gain. By 2010, the Hispanic population of rural America stood at 3.8 million, a gain of 45 percent from 2000.

Children are in the vanguard of the growing diversity of both nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas. Nationwide in 2010, minority children represented 46.3 percent of the U.S. population under age of 18. In contrast, only 33 percent of the adult population is minority. The patterns are similar in rural America, where nearly 28 percent of the nonmetropolitan population under the age of 18 in 2010 was minority. This compares with 18 percent of the adult population. Hispanics represent the largest share of the minority nonmetropolitan youth population. These patterns among young people clearly are a harbinger of future racial change and diversity in rural America, especially as deaths among the older, largely white, population are replaced by minority births.

Discussion and Conclusion

Population growth in rural America has slowed in the first decade of the 21st century as migration to rural areas slowed. At the same time, rural America is an increasingly diverse place, fueled by natural increase rather than in-migration. Migration continued to account for the majority of the population gain in rural
counties adjacent to metropolitan areas as well as in fast-growing recreational and retirement counties. But, even here, population gains were considerably smaller than they had been during the 1990s, because migration gains diminished.

In many rural areas, natural decrease (when deaths exceed births) is now gaining speed. Natural decrease is the eventual consequence of the protracted exodus of generations of young adults from rural areas. Couple this with contemporary declines in rural fertility and the picture is worrisome.

The first decade of the 21st century also reveals new patterns of racial and ethnic diversity in America. Indeed, Hispanics represent a new source of demographic vigor in many parts of rural America, especially in the Midwest and Southeast. The rapid natural growth of the Hispanic population also underscores the changing racial and ethnic mix of rural America's young people. Children in many parts of rural America are more likely to be black or Hispanic than in the past. At the same time, there are still many rural regions where opportunities for interaction between young people from different backgrounds are limited. To fully understand the demographic changes underway, it is crucial to appreciate that rural America is an increasingly diverse place. And, that this diversity plays out across a number of dimensions.
First, because this growing diversity in certain rural areas is most pronounced among children, institutions that serve young people (in education, health care, and so forth) will be the first to feel the impact of this growing diversity. Many of the rural institutions that serve children are among the most expensive for local governments. Adjusting to a more diverse child population can be expensive. For example, the cost of providing English as a Second Language classes or providing translators in rural hospitals is a significant expense for cash-strapped rural school and medical systems. Adjusting to this growing diversity would be a financial challenge for these communities during the best of times, but the situation is made worse by the severe recession of 2008.

Also, a growth in the number of children is also a significant expense to rural school districts than have seen their student population dwindling for decades. Nor are all the challenges that rural communities face financial. Hispanics are transforming the social and economic fabric of many small towns, while raising important policy questions about their successful incorporation into American society.\textsuperscript{xii}

Second, although population growth is slowing in rural America, it is doing so at very different rates. In remote rural agricultural areas, the population slowdown has been profound. In hundreds of these counties, more people are now dying than being born, and young adults continue to leave, as they have for decades. Here rural policy must ameliorate the adverse impacts of a diminishing population on the provision of critical services and support programs as well as provide access to the resources (e.g., the internet, capital, and expertise) needed to expand the local infrastructure and enhance future development opportunities.

In contrast, in fast-growing rural counties, policies and expertise are needed to address the complex issues of managing growth and development. These needs are particularly acute in communities with recreational and natural amenities. In such areas, a rapidly growing population puts additional pressure on the environmentally sensitive areas that originally attracted the migrants, but now may be overwhelmed by them. Managing rapid growth represents a serious challenge that many rural governments are simply unprepared to meet.

Any policies to address the needs of nonmetropolitan areas must take account of these significant changes. Policies appropriate to traditional agricultural communities may not work well in fast-growing retirement destinations. Policies proposed to address the needs of America’s large metropolitan areas may not have the same effect in rural areas, where distances are greater, isolation is common, and agglomeration advantages are fewer. Comprehensive policies that consider the special needs of rural communities and include input from local rural leaders may mitigate the demographic and economic challenges that remain in many rural communities. Improving the opportunities, accessibility, and viability of rural areas is critical both to their 51 million residents and to the larger nation that depends on the contributions that rural America makes to the country’s material, environmental, and social well-being.
Endnotes


